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Convocation address, September, 1925

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1925  
September

THE QUEST FOR THE REAL

Philosophers and prophets through the ages have been trying to tell men what is ultimately real and yet we seem to be as far as ever from the goal of understanding. We are now living in what H. G. Wells has described as "The Age of Confusion." Instead of having achieved the basis of a stable social order and the certainty of progress many of our best thinkers are convinced that one civilization will be unable to survive the strains of conflict which are involved in failure to be able to tell the real from the accidental.

In spite of the unparalleled attendance at universities and the masterful achievements of science there probably has never been before such uncertainty about the very foundations of knowledge and the meaning of life. We are beginning to question even the most sacred doctrines. James Harvey Robinson in "The Mind in the Making" says that the older and more widespread a belief the more probable it is that it is wrong, for the ages have accumulated reasons for its support at the same time more and more curbed criticisms. How suddenly these beliefs, in religion, morals, and political science are put on the defensive.

Since confidence in what were thought to be the verities is waning there is an ominous tendency to make an emotional transfer to some purely capricious aspect of the universe and to insist that it is more real than what we formerly believed. These aspects are equally artificial and arbitrary and may be called particularistic. They may contain elements of truth in them, but by their emphasis they distort and conceal rather than clarify reality. It is several of these contemporary particularisms which I wish to discuss.



There is a revival of conviction about the ultimateness of the beliefs of religious sects which are accepted as substitutes for further search for truth. Each is interpreted as real though the variations are myriad. They emphasize the traditional and the dogmatic rather than the modern and empirical. There may have been sincerity in the prominent Ohio preacher and satisfaction in his congregation when he said that he "would rather go to Heaven with a delusion than to Hell with truth," but the achieving of heaven through delusion can not fail to be a fools paradise.

Spiritual values are not secured by theological dogma. Those who contend that they are, mistake the shadow for the substance. It has been my rare good fortune to have had rather intimate associations with President Masaryk of Czechoslovakia, who is considered one of the most eminent characters of our time. He is a man religious through and through, and was for many years professor of philosophy at the University of Prague. One time we were sitting in his study, and, as often happened, fell to talking religion, finally he pointed to the side of the room filled with books on metaphysics and theology and said: "When I was young and stupid I used to read those books and learn about religion, now I read novels and poetry in which I find the spiritual strivings of men described. That tells me better what is real in religion."

Particularism in religion may point toward the real but unless it can see beyond itself it makes for darkness rather than light. In Cleveland, Father Tarnavsky's Greek Catholic Church was on Literary Road, and one of his members went to the Greek Orthodox Church on Starkweather Avenue, and he was puzzled because the services were identical, and he went to the priest and said "Father, what is the difference between these churches?" It happens that Literary Road, Starkweather Avenue, and 14th Street on which Joe lived all lead to Lincoln Park.



Father Tarnavsky said "Joe if you wanted to go to Lincoln Park you would go up 14th Street, and if you lived on this street you would go by it, and if you lived on Starkweather you would go that way. Now it is the same way with the churches. They are all roads to heaven, and you go by the one you are in. If you were a Jew you would be by that road, and if you were a Methodist you would go that way. But Joe if you started for Lincoln Park and went into a saloon and sat down you would not get there. So in the church you must keep going." This is a much broader view of sectarianism than that held by those who are convinced that they know the only way of salvation.

Just now we are witnessing the particularism of religion as set over against both science in general, and the particularisms of science. Your university experience has put an emphasis on science, and since you have concentrated always more on one science than on others, your own attention, and the enthusiasm of your instructor almost inevitably has put that science out of focus. It is hard to remember that each science artificially limits the field of its attention, so that the findings of science can never be substituted for reality which has no such limitations. There are two reasons why the scientist's mind should be kept open. First the premises on which all sciences are based are hypothetical and constantly change, and secondly, the scope of each science is arbitrarily limited. In some of its aspects, geology and biology merge. No one can say exactly where the line should be drawn between physiology and chemistry. Psychology runs into several other fields, and yet too often the devotee of an interrelated science will insist on explaining the universe from his partial approach to it with all the bigotry and intolerance of a religious fanatic. The absurdity of the situation which led to the Tennessee trial is that neither theology nor evolution is the whole of reality.



A few weeks ago I finished reading Sinclair Lewis' recent novel Arrowsmith later in the evening. I had been much absorbed by the conflicting situation in which the hero who was striving to be a real scientist, seemed, by that very fact to be driven to be an abnormal human being. I awoke in the middle of the night with a vivid dream which ended with the generalization; "There are some problems in the world that are insoluble." Arrowsmith found those who practice the art of medicine ridiculous, and the reader finds that those who are devoted to the science of medicine impossible and there seems to be no middle ground. Many of you face just such an antithesis, and one part of your job is to help make the problem solvable.

The danger to civilization comes from the substitution of certainty for humility, and bigotry for tolerance. One fights for what he thinks is real not for what is really real. We have no right to claim ultimateness for anything we yet know. As William James used to say we have encyclopedic ignorance, and as the English Philosopher, Bertrand Russel, said recently, "after all we know very little."

The tendency of the student in any field is to be a particularist, and to explain the universe as a whole by his particular outlook on it and to be intolerant of the outlook of others. A university, in aim, at least, presents the whole range of the contemporary approaches to reality, and the sum of them ought to equal what we now possess of it. However, no one can comprehend the whole of even the little that is known. Each graduate knows more in his major field than is known about that field by the majority of the members of the university faculty. We all, however, have two things in common, the necessity of living in contemporary society, and the urge to find the significance of our own lives .



But our artificial particularism is found not only in religious sects, and specific sciences but also in our social groupings. We have discovered that the individual is not ultimate, and so it has become immoral to be an individual braggart, --conceit is a vice; but to magnify our group is still a virtue. As yet there is no moral taint to claiming to be in the best college, finest city or greatest country in the world. It is even expected of us by the rest of our group. Of course it can not be any more real than any other particularism and yet we stake our lives on it. We shall soon make a vice of group egotism as we have of individual egotism for the facts justify it as little. It makes no difference how small or how large and complicated the group may be we tend to look upon it as the ultimately real, as the fulfillment of the purpose of creation. At the present moment the state and nation are the popularly accepted groups, but the rumblings of international movements and the actuality of international relations have driven the absolutists to the rescue of what is already lost.

The shout about hundred per cent patriotism just as the fervent support of fundamental religious doctrines is the product of defense complexes. The facts tend to undermine the validity of their claims and make us afraid. Let us consider patriotism. In the first place the limits of the nation to which a people is patriotic are as accidental and arbitrary as, say, the lines between biology and psychology or between psychology and sociology. No one really knows where the biological leaves off and the psychological begins, but an arbitrary line has been drawn which makes it necessary for the scientist in each field to constantly make excursions in to the domain of the other. The little countries of Europe were determined by the area that could be covered on horseback, and are anachronisms in the day of railroads, automobiles, aeroplanes and radio. Corruption and ruthlessness entered into the forma-



tion of every country in the world, and yet we have every where a technic for inculcating particularistic patriotism which is comparable to the dogmatism of a religious creed. The children of France and Germany are even now being taught that their highest virtue is to hate each other for the love of their own country.

There was a time when a country had almost hundred per cent significance, but that becomes less every day, so that frantic efforts have to be made to build up false emotions about the reality of our country to our lives. It has reality to be sure, just as psychology has a place in the bringing up of children, but successful children are not brought up by psychology alone and neither are good citizens made by a hundred per cent of their own countries. Take American Christian Protestantism which a great organization is defending as peculiarly American. It originated among the Jews in Asia, got its theology from the Greek and Roman philosophers, its ecclesiastical organization from medieval Roman Catholics, and its Protestant idea from a German. The percentage that is solely American is exceedingly small and our spiritual poverty would be great if we were limited to one-hundred per cent American religion.

If we turn back to science we find that national boundaries have nothing to do with it. The law of gravity, the theory of relativity, and every other principle on which science is based belong to the world. Germs have no nationality, nor do methods of dealing with them. America has made some contributions but it would be a handicapped country if our science were limited to our own achievements.

Patriotism is still used to throw sand in the eyes of the public by selfish economic interests, but our very economic prosperity depends on our international trade, and the wideness of our actual interest in this is shown by the fact that almost every daily paper in the United States prints every day the exchange values of money in all parts of



the world. I recently got a letter of credit from an Ohio bank and it was accompanied by a book giving a list of thousands of correspondent banks throughout the world. Our present banking is hardly understandable without its international aspects. Not only is the farmer in Ohio dependent for the price of his wheat on the international market, but the coal miner finds his interest linked up with the miners of England. The economic organization of the world is intricately and inevitably international, and an absolute patriotism in the face of it is futile beating of the head against a stone wall.

Take sport which is of paramount interest to the youth of America. To be sure we have our base ball, but swimming the English Channel is not to be ignored, and when a prize fighter comes from France, Africa, or South America, millions of dollars are spent in promoting his fight and acres of space given in the newspapers to meet the popular American interest.

In the field of art America would be pathetic if we were limited to American contributions. Architecture, painting, literature, drama and music as developed in America draw from the world. We are even building gasoline stations like Japanese pagodas. The only genuine contribution to music that America has made are negro spirituals and jazz which were brought here from Africa. Reality is not to be found in exclusive patriotism.

It is probably more or less unconscious realization of the futility of the present state that has led to the growing attention to race as the ultimate unit of reality. The race, --that is something real and worth dying for! But which race? The white race constitutes somewhat less than a third of the human race. Its rationalizations to justify itself in its present position of dominance are a fine example of a defense mechanism in the face of fear. The people of Asia, both brown and yellow are getting tired of white exploitation and the white race has



to shout harder to make up for the prestige that it is losing. But to many of every race, race seems to be the last citadel of reality, and yet no one has been able satisfactorily to define what a race is, and we are driven to the conclusion that it too is an artificial and accidental classification. If the red headed, or those above five feet ten in height were set aside as a race everything that we now find as characteristic of a race would soon be found in them. If the sense of sight were lost our present racial classification would disappear. A scientist has suggested that we may have to give up color as basis of race and take, perhaps, susceptibility to and immunity from disease as the criterion. There is some effort to make racial classifications on the basis of intelligent quotients, but according to that method some of us would find ourselves reclassified. We must conclude that reality is even beyond race.

Since the vastness of our ignorance makes it irrational to credit any single product of our thinking or of our emotions with the qualities of absolute reality, we are reduced to the necessity of finding some symbolic method of bridging the gulf between our partial objectives and the possibilities of life. This has something to do with art. Havelock Ellis says that the rythm of the dance is the best symbol of it. At any rate it is beyond the possibility of concrete description. We live in space and have the concept of infinity; in time and have a notion of eternity; in the imperfect and measure it by the perfect. Here it seems to me is suggested the possibility of rythm, reality can ignore neither side of the pairs. The art of living requires that we turn in proper balance from one to the other and back again.

This means that in religion theological dogma, and ecclesiastical organization are finite parts of spiritual purpose. The first are futile without the last, but the last is pointless without the first. But the vastness of spiritual possibilities makes it absurd to try to draw a



line about them and say they are defined, and it may happen that the heathen in his blindness who bows down to wood and stone has a nearer approach to reality than many worshippers in cathedrals. We can try to recognize true religion when we see it, and it may appear under names which seem to deny religion. I think I have often seen it in such places.

Likewise science deals with the concrete and the factual but to be real it must have the scientific spirit and the scientific method which lead not in the direction of impatience and bigotry, but to openmindedness and humility.

One must live in the country, but loyalty is a manifestation of character, and it is very different from national conceit. One may thrill at the sight of the flag of his country but that does not exclude the possibility of his thrilling at the sight of the flags of other countries, any more than love for one's own family excludes the appreciation of the love of others for their families, but the larger appreciations make one feel that he is more nearly approaching the real thing.

One is the member of a race. He may share in its traditions and sympathize with its struggles, but if he forgets that humanity is greater than race he is giving up the greater for the less.

At the beginning I said that there is a possibility that civilization may not survive. If it does not survive it will be because the particularism of religion, science, state, and race prevail over the reality of which they are only part. If their devotees will raise their eyes they may see that none need exclude the others. But will they raise their eyes? I hope so but it will not be easy.

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